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Faint Heart

Never Won Fair Lady

By EVERETT MACBURNIE

Alice and I had for some time been excellent friends, but it never occurred to me to look upon her as anything more than a friend. She was a great flirt and practiced her wiles on most any man who came along, but not on me. One day she surprised me by saying:

"John, why have you never made love to me?"

"You mean why have I never joined the innumerable caravan of those who bow down to you and whom you send on their way, sadder, but wiser?"

"Nonsense!"

"On the contrary, it's the truth. You don't consider that if I made love to you and you sent me on like the others our companionship would be spoiled?"

"Why should that be necessary?"

"I don't know. It's the invariable result in such cases."

"How do you know I would send you on?"

"I don't, but I'd bet ten to one you would."

She made no reply to this. We were sitting on a rustic bench in the garden. She was toying with a rose, one of the last of the summer, tumbler in against her lips directly under her nose. I knew very well she was doing it because there was something in it suggestive of a kiss, the lips and the rose being very much alike.

"Don't try to fool me, Alice. We've been mighty good friends, and I've felt complimented that you've thought so much of me you don't care to interfere with our friendly relationship. I'm going away tomorrow, and I don't know whether I'll come back or not. If I do I want to find my old chum here just as she's always been."

"Suppose you find me married?"

"In that case you'll still be my friend Alice, and I your friend Tom. And doubtless your husband and I will come to be good friends too."

I said this in a half-hearted way. I knew very well that marriage makes a lot of difference in friendships. Several of my men chums had married, and I had come to consider such friendships as destroyed by wedlock. At any rate none of them were ever the same afterward. Alice didn't say she hoped so too. She kept fumbling the rose against her lips in a tantalizing fashion and didn't say anything. It was plain she had broken through the hedge that divides the realms of friendship from those of love and was looking about her in the new domain.

It is said that love begets love. At any rate there was that in her action to inoculate me. And yet I knew her so well that I didn't dare trust her. I had seen men hang about her for a few weeks, sometimes only for a few weeks, then suddenly drop off and never again be seen in her company. During the bustling of the bee about the flower I had called the bee a fool. Should I now make a fool of myself?

"What is the pleasure you take in leading a man to make love to you, encouraging him to propose to you and then sending him off about his business?"

"I deny that I have ever done such a thing."

This was a pretty definite statement. I wondered if after all there wasn't some truth in it. Did these fellows conjure up encouragement when it was not intended? Was there something in Alice's treatment of them that looked like flirting, but was not flirting, or was she flirting and yet unconscious of doing so? Far be it from me, a man, to analyze a woman's motives in such matters. I have sometimes believed they don't always know themselves.

Alice had never acted in this way toward me before, and I was at a loss to attribute to her a motive for her doing so. I could not believe that she had suddenly made up her mind that she wanted me or that she was willing to destroy our friendship to satisfy a whim. If there was a middle course between these two I had not the power to discern it. My surmises ended just as all of man's surmises must ever end—in uncertainty. And yet should I analyze myself in the matter would I come out any better? I am now inclined to think that I had always felt for Alice a desire for her possession that I had not realized. At least this is the only explanation I can give for my action on this occasion. Possibly there may have been a bit of curiosity, a modicum of the hunter's instinct, both re-enforced by a feeling that a lifetime passed with her would be an agreeable one.

"Well," I said at last, "I will give you an opportunity to show whether you are in earnest or whether this is just such a case as you have been through often before. I love you. Will you be my wife?"

Looking back at this proposal I wonder how I could have supposed that any girl who was interested in a man purely for love could have been satisfied with it. There was no more warmth in the tone with which I spoke the words than in the words themselves. I might as well have spoken a declaration into a phonograph and then set the machine gridding them out to her while I read a newspaper. Indeed,

what then seemed to me to be a compliment, considering that she first probed the subject or at least gave me a hint as to her feelings, now seems to me to have been little less than an insult.

I really thought I was putting her in a position to declare her love for me if she had such love to declare, whereas I was simply putting her in a position to accept me for a husband if she chose to do so. She sat silent, toying with the rose, though now she was pulling it to pieces. Presently she said:

"No, I think it is fated that we shall not get beyond friendship."

I was much more disappointed than I had thought I would be at this reply. But I did not show it to my action, nor did I upbraid her. I simply said that I would do my best to maintain our past friendly status, but whether it could be maintained or not I did not know. I hoped it could. I arose, offered her my hand, which she took without warmth, bade her good-by and told her that I would see her again before my departure.

But I didn't. The barrier that I feared would be the result of love-making had come between us. I could not take leave of her both as a rejected lover and as a friend; therefore I would not take leave of her at all. I departed without seeing her. I considered that I had joined the "innumerable caravan."

The object of my journey was to investigate a business in which I had been invited to take an interest. Finding that it looked favorable, I embarked in it and for five years was absorbed in it. At the end of that time I concluded to take a vacation with two objects in view. One was to take a rest, the other to go back to my old home and visit old friends.

It was about the same time of year as when I had come away that one afternoon a few days after my arrival I went to call on Alice, who was now midway between girlhood and old maidhood. I found her in the garden where I had left her five years before tending her flowers. Hearing some one coming up the walk, she raised herself and with a trowel in her hand stood looking at me. I saw that she recognized me, but whether she experienced pleasure or pain at seeing me again I could not determine. She had always had the faculty of concealing her feelings.

She welcomed me with a certain cordiality and led me to the same rustic seat on which we had sat during our last and memorable interview.

"You are not married, I believe?" I said.

"No."

"I have often wondered why it is that girls such as you are or were, with lots of suitors, very often don't marry at all."

"I suppose it's because they don't meet the man they want or that the money they want doesn't want them. For my part, I would not marry any man unless he loved me."

"But men have loved you whom you didn't want."

"I have had men tell me they loved me who meant it, and I have had men tell me they loved me who didn't. At any rate, they told me in such a half-hearted way that it meant nothing."

I picked up my ears. For the first time in the years that had intervened since my proposal I realized that it was half-hearted. Could it be that she referred to mine as such a proposition?

"I remember," she continued, "on that afternoon when you were here last you upbraided me for trifling. It seems to me that if a man loves a woman and proposes to her to gratify a curiosity as to whether she is trifling or not with him he is the more reprehensible of the two."

There was something sadly reproachful in this that made me wince.

"If you refer to me I certainly have paid for the wrong I committed, though I do not admit the charge, for I have lived a lonely life since."

"I could only attribute your indifferent tone to curiosity."

"You were wrong. I did not realize that my proposal was half-hearted, but I will admit that I did not know your refusal meant so much to me. We do not know how much we desire an object till we find we can't have it. Then we fret and fume and refuse to be comforted."

"In that case, if the object is at last attained, we find no comfort in it."

"Not so. The not getting what we want shows us that we did not realize how much we wanted it. I admit that when we talked of this matter years ago I was fearful of a refusal. Fear is no weapon with which to make love."

"It is a good weapon with which to keep those apart who should be together."

A slight trembling in her voice when she said this struck a responsive chord in my heart. I had not only injured myself, but her. I had nothing to say.

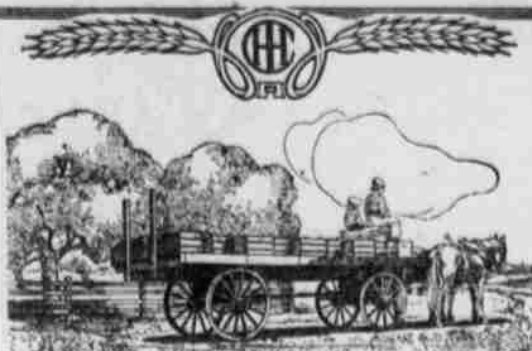
"Why did you go away without coming to see me, as you said you would?"

"I could no longer come as a friend, and I did not wish to come as a rejected lover. But enough of this, Alice. I, who thought I had some insight into a woman's nature, have been a fool. My stupidity has cost me infinite pain. I now know that under my youthful friendship you were concealing an enduring love, but a love such as may pass away at a breath, but one that, growing slowly, becomes an absorbing passion."

Flashing that words were inadequate to express all I felt, I took her in my arms and told the rest in a croon.

"Five years lost," she said through tears, "on account of a misunderstanding."

"They shall be made up for by a greater intensity of those that are to come."



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